

Corrected Transcript

Interview with **NORM NIXON**

Interviewed by Betty King

Norm Nixon was one of a group of young people who worked on Marion Barry's 1978 mayoral campaign. In 1979 he graduated from Cardozo High School and in 1980 he was selected for the first Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute. Like many alumni of that program, he credits Mayor Barry and the Institute for opening undreamt-of opportunities for him. He had a distinguished career in DC government, largely in Employment Services, has been involved in many civic and community activities and has received numerous awards. He is an Associate Minister at Union Temple Baptist Church and works for the first adult public charter school east of the Anacostia River.

13 October 2015

INTERVIEWER: My name is Betty King. And today is October 13, 2015. I'm talking with Norm Nixon, who was a volunteer with the Marion Barry campaign in 1978.

Norm, tell me about your early life. You were born and brought up in the District, I believe?

NORM NIXON: Yes. I was born and raised here in Washington, D.C. I grew up on 14th and U Street, Northwest, and then later we moved to the Park Morton public housing complex, then Catholic University area, and then moved on my own, and now reside in Southeast Washington ironically around the corner from where Mayor Barry used to live out on Suitland Road.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

NORM NIXON: Yes.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: Well, tell me about the early days. You told me a story once before about the riots in 1968 [after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.] when you were living on U Street and 14th.

NORM NIXON: Yes. When I was living on 14th Street, the 1968 riots occurred, and there was, you know, just the whole scene of stores being looted and buildings burning and eventually the National Guard came in, and I always wanted to kind of know what was the cause of that and did a little reading early on about the Civil Rights Movement, and it had a slight impact on me. Before that, we would hang out on 14th and U Street as kids, and we would see the Black Panther Party people, the SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] people as well,

and, of course, being kids, we didn't really pay any attention to that, but after seeing the National Guard come in, in '68, and reading about it, everything that I saw kind of came into a realization about what the Civil Rights Movement was about, but I didn't have anything to apply it to, so life kind of moved on.

INTERVIEWER: And then you—so you were 5 years old in 1968.

NORM NIXON: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: And then you went on to school. You went to Gonzaga?

NORM NIXON: Well, actually, I ended up going to Cardozo.

INTERVIEWER: I mean Cardozo.

NORM NIXON: Well, it's the same colors, purple.

[Laughter.]

NORM NIXON: I believe both schools have the color purple. I was living in Park Morton, which is a public housing site, and we used to have people who were running for office and elected officials come through our neighborhood quite often, so I even remember Channing Phillips, who was running for [DC Delegate to] Congress [in 1971], I believe at that time, [came] into the neighborhood, and we got his autograph. I still have his autograph at home. Mayor Washington, former Mayor Walter Washington, would come through when we had a program or something in the neighborhood. But Marion Barry, that was my first ever meeting him. He had a Pride [youth training and employment] center in Park Morton, and we were too young to work, but the older guys got to work, and they had these jumpsuits with "Pride" on them, and we were really jealous of them. But Marion Barry would come by every so often. I mean, he was like a hero in the neighborhood because a lot of those guys had a source of money that they could come to by legal means because realistically the only other way guys would make money was either card games or crap games, and so it was really like—you know, we kind of said we're waiting our turn to become members of Pride as well.

INTERVIEWER: Well, now, how did it come about that you volunteered for Marion's campaign in 1978?

NORM NIXON: A gentleman by the name of Conrad Smith, we were hanging out on Georgia Avenue, down by Banneker, what was then Banneker Junior High School, and he asked a few of us, did we want to make some money? And a few people said no, and I was like, "Money? Okay. What are we going to be doing?" And we ended up hanging up signs or posters originally, some leaflets here and there, and had a chance to get by the [Barry 1978] campaign

office probably a couple of times, and really didn't know what was going on, but there were a lot of nice people who were real enthusiastic about seeing young people around, people from different ethnic backgrounds, and it just looked like they were on a mission about something. And, again, being a young person who wasn't really exposed to politics, I really didn't know what place that had in my life, but ironically, you know, it seemed like my life was on a course where I would end up having a working relationship and personal relationship with Mr. Barry.

INTERVIEWER: And you were working with other young people, and I know that Jamie Raskin and Charlie Segal and some other young people were part of that group as well.

NORM NIXON: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And you were working with people from all different parts of the city.

NORM NIXON: I remember Loraine Bennett, but I really couldn't remember a lot of the other—

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Loraine Bennett, I interviewed her the other day.

NORM NIXON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: She remembers you, too. Yeah. So the election is a success, and you finished your high school a year later.

NORM NIXON: Yeah. A year later finished high school.

We were invited to come to the victory party [for the 1978 campaign], and I think on the way there going down Georgia Avenue we got distracted, but I read about it in the paper the next day, and it was like, oh, man, the guy, Marion Barry, won the election, but, you know, again, life went back to normal, I was coming up on my senior year of school, so I was focused in on school, but he created a program called the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute at that time, it is now called Marion Barry's Youth Leadership Institute by law now, and they selected two young people from every public housing site in the city to be a part of the program, and I was selected as one of the two from Park Morton to attend the program.

It was a life-changing experience for me. It really put in perspective the campaigning and some of the people that I met, and it was a place where 200 of us came together at Howard University to learn about leadership skills and learn about our city and that there were eight wards and that we could make a difference. And we were there at Howard University for 2 weeks. And at the end of that experience, everybody cried because we didn't want to leave each other because we just had a phenomenal time, met a lot of city officials, and Cabinet heads came by to us. And we actually worked during the day and did training at night, so we

were training up until 10:00 in the [evening], and never really went to sleep because we would stay up in the dormitory talking all evening. So it was one of the greatest times of my life.

INTERVIEWER: So you graduated and then I think you went to work in the government, didn't you?

NORM NIXON: Yes. What happened, Mr. Barry came up to Howard the first time, and I was sitting in the training room, and he was talking to everybody, and I was kind of tired that day, and he walked over to me and said, "Hey, what's your name?" and I said—you know, told him my name, Norman Nixon, and I told him about Pride and I grew up in Park Morton, and it seemed like we made a connection at that time. And then I even remember in that first meeting when I was working in Park Morton, I had a job in the community center, I went downtown to buy some tennis shoes, and there was a store called Herman's Atlas, and it was right next-door to Sunny Surplus, and before I could get [off of the 70 bus on E street there were so many sirens]—when I got down to 9th Street, I saw so many police cars, I had never seen a scene like that before, and that's when they had the Hanafi Muslim takeover at the District Building. And so I went down the street because I had to see where all these police cars were going, and I got to a point where the police wouldn't let us go any further. So I looked for a while and went back home, and then we saw the reports about Marion Barry being shot at that time. You know, so when I look back at those things, I'm like everything was kind of building this up, these experiences that I didn't know what they were about all kind of capsulized when I got into the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute. And so when I graduated from high school, I met Mr. Barry. The most dynamic thing that I remember about him is that the next time that he saw me, he remembered my name.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

NORM NIXON: And that was just phenomenal. That was like the Mayor of the city remembered my name.

INTERVIEWER: He was like that. He was like that.

NORM NIXON: Yeah. So he realized I graduated from high school, and said, "You can come and work in the office, I'll give you [an Internship]—," "You can come to work 2 or 3 hours after school," and I did that. And I was able to get a government job and really learned about government, really learned about government.

INTERVIEWER: And did you go to university?

NORM NIXON: I went to the University of the District of Columbia. And I would say I was more thrilled about going to work was school because Mr. Barry appointed us to Boards and Commissions, which you were in charge of. And, I mean, who would think that a 16-, 17-year-

old young person would get appointed to a board, and him telling the people on the board that these young people have just as much authority and weight as you all do. But then having the pressure, we had to perform to see if this really would work. So I actually served on three boards, would get to go to dinners, community meetings, just being exposed to stuff that, you know, living in my small part of the city that I never knew existed.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And after—you did—but you worked with the Summer Youth Employment Program and the Mayor's Youth Leadership Program for some years, didn't you? Or was it briefly?

NORM NIXON: I worked—I actually worked with the Youth Leadership Institute for a number of years, [became a full time staff member and directed the program for about 5 or 6 years], but I spent 2 years working in the Mayor's Constituent Service Office with Anita Bonds [deputy campaign manager in the 1978 campaign], and so I was one of the—well, at that time called youth constituent coordinators for the Mayor, so I did that for 2 years.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And tell me about your career after that. What did you do after that?

NORM NIXON: After the government, I currently work for a public charter school for adults, and so my –

INTERVIEWER: Really?

NORM NIXON: Yeah, I run vocational programs, so I help people get certified with computer certifications and HVAC certifications, things that will give them a leg up in society. We also help them get their GEDs as well.

INTERVIEWER: And you're married and have children?

NORM NIXON: I've been married for 22 years.

INTERVIEWER: Congratulations.

NORM NIXON: Thank you. I have two children. One, my son, is a sophomore at Delaware State University, and my daughter is a junior at McKinley High School. Both of them went through the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute, I insisted on that they get that experience, which was great for them.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's wonderful. What impact do you think Marion has had on you? I think your own story testifies to it, but the impact that Marion has had on young people in the District is not confined just to your own experience, it's very broad, is it not?

NORM NIXON: Oh, very broad. I mean, of course, the stories of people saying their first summer job came through him. A lot of people look at that as, well, everybody says that, but a lot of people don't realize that families really depended on those young people working, but a lot of young people got into the Federal Government because of that program, because they worked there during the summer and those agencies picked them up, and so a lot of people were able to develop careers out of that. Some other innovations, you had police and fire cadet programs where people also got careers.

But there was one instance, they had the student protest up at Howard University, and I got a call early that morning saying that – [from] one of the young people actually in the Institute [who] called me and Kemry Hughes [young Barry supporter], and we all looped into a three-way call, and he was saying the helicopters are on the roof and the riot squad was about to come in the building and attack us, and I couldn't think of anybody else to call, and so we couldn't think of anybody else to call but Marion Barry, and so me and Kemry decided I would run up to Howard to see what I could do to intercede because I live closer to there, and he would ride down to the District Building, and he was immediately able to go in and see the Mayor, the Mayor heard his story about what was going on and said, "We've got to go up to Howard University," and there was some hesitation with some people in the office about him getting involved with that, but, you know, him being a student leader, he understood that he could not have something of that nature happen in the city, and so they rolled up to Howard, stopped everything from happening, and the students were able to negotiate something with the school and end that. And, you know, at the end of the day, you have to look and say, wow, we were able to get the Mayor to stop everything he was doing to go up to Howard University, that he had that much faith to believe in us that he needed to go up there. Again, phenomenal, just at some points I was able to advance for him, I [got] to spend a lot of time with him, and just crisscrossing the city with him and just seeing his compassion for people. If somebody came to him with an issue, he took it very seriously and had somebody actually deal with that. And then he would point out buildings that he had built in the city and the fact that he had minority contractors and businesspeople actually own those buildings. That's phenomenal.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Yeah. He was a remarkable man and contributed greatly to the city. Are there any other anecdotes or observations you would like to make?

NORM NIXON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that for me, when people, even with the negative things that are said about Mayor Barry and even through his own personal issues that he had to deal with, this man really cared for the city and cared deeply about people, and, I mean, just the way that he sometimes thought he was like my father, so he would tell me, "Norm, don't do this," "Watch out for this, that, or the other," and, "How are things going?" and we kept that relationship going throughout the years. And I think he really believed that young people would eventually take over this city, be leaders, and not just in politics, it was about being leaders in whatever field that you would choose to go into, and he had a deep passion for young people, and seniors as well. I don't think they'll ever be—I mean, including any politician

I've met. Anybody like him who—even his enemies, political enemies, he brought them in, much to the chagrin of the people—

INTERVIEWER: Who were already involved.

NORM NIXON: —who were already in. I mean, he brought them in, and that was, I mean, to me, spiritual to a lot of degrees because, you know, who would do that? You know? Who would do that? And you don't see politicians like that anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for talking to us. I appreciate it.

NORM NIXON: Oh, you're welcome. You're welcome.

INTERVIEWER: Great story.